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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the case method as a model for teaching education students about play. The case method may contribute to an examination of the barriers to children's play expression within school and create more effective classroom practice. Within the model, students can consider cases which have been carefully constructed from actual practice and designed to illuminate the complexity of human situations. Through discussion, analysis, and collaborative problem solving, the case method provides an interactive forum in which students can construct knowledge about the nature, value, and purpose of play in early education. Play education should be guided by a framework building upon and integrating: (1) theoretical knowledge regarding play; (2) practical skills applied in the classroom setting; and (3) dispositions toward play and children's learning. The case method facilitates self-governed learning; produces cognitive dissonance; requires students to apply theories, use analytical skills, and create innovative approaches to resolving problems; and fosters independent thinking and reflection. It is important to develop with care the written narrative and case questions, to conduct the case discussion, and teach case writing to students. A play case bank may be built with teacher- and student-written cases, videos, films, and books. (KDFB)

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Constructing Knowledge about Play: Case Method and Teacher Education

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Play, an intrinsically motivating activity that characterizes childhood, is one of the most complex behaviors studied by those who work with children. In order to experience success as facilitators of young children's development, child specialists (e.g., parents, teachers, caretakers) must develop an in-depth understanding about the nature and functions of play.

To learn about play, one must become a player; that is, through interaction with others, one must play with and explore new perspectives, concepts, and ideas. Engaging adult learners as cognitive players (creative, analytical thinkers) provides them with opportunities to construct knowledge and dispositions about chil-

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dren's play. This paper will examine play education utilizing a constructivist approach known as the case method.

Goals of Play Education

Guided by child development theory and principles of developmentally appropriate practice, teacher-educators and early childhood specialists have developed a framework for play education. The framework builds upon and integrates (1) theoretical understandings of play (knowledge), (2) practical applications of play theory (skills), and (3) dispositions toward play and children's learning.

Theoretical Knowledge

A premise for studying play is that play is valuable. Recent publications on play by leaders in the field of early childhood teacher education have attempted to explain the significance of play. Their work has provided a theoretical framework, an overview, and a certain perspective on the nature and functions of play:

1. play is a medium for learning and development (Bergen, 1988).

2. play "integrates and balances all aspects of human functioning" and helps children develop skills and attitudes they need in order to adapt to future demands (Rogers and Sawyers, 1988).

3. play strengthens children's feelings of personal power and helps them develop a "can-do" attitude (Wassermann, 1990).

4. play provides a context in which teachers can help children develop positive sociopolitical concepts and constructive social skills that may prevent violence (Carlsson-Paige and Levin, 1987; Levin, 1994).

5. play provides a context in which teachers can facilitate behaviors and developmental skills that promote the developmental growth of children with special needs (Linder, 1994).

Practical Skills

A major goal in teacher education programs is to promote the transformation of ideas (theoretical knowledge) into classroom practice. Play educators have examined the process through which skillful teachers nurture play in early childhood settings. Jones and Reynolds (1992) provide the following examples of supportive roles performed by teachers:

Stage manager The teacher contributes to play by structuring and preparing the physical environment to allow for optimal interaction with objects and people.

Mediator The teacher sustains play by modeling and engaging children in problem solving and by facilitating positive social interactions.

Player The teacher enriches the content of play by briefly participating in child-initiated play episodes and by encouraging children to elaborate on their ideas.

Scribe The teacher encourages and helps young children to symbolically represent their ideas and reflect on their play experiences.

Assessor and communicator The teacher systematically assesses children's growth and development and communicates that assessment to parents and professionals.

Planner The teacher is a co-constructor (together with children), organizer, and critical observer (together with adults) of curriculum.

Dispositions

As students of early care and education engage in play situations and assume these roles, they gain new knowledge, strengthen their skills, and develop confidence as facilitators of play. These experiences stimulate changes in attitudes or dispositions toward play and the art of teaching. Carter and Curtis (1994) have identified traits that characterize master teachers. Here is a summary of dispositions they attribute to effective teachers:

1. delight in and are curious about children's development
2. value children's play
3. expect continuous change and challenge
4. are willing to take risks and make mistakes
5. provide time for regular reflection and self-examination
6. seek collaboration and peer support
7. are watchdogs and whistle-blowers

Play education provides a foundation for early care and education practice and prepares novice teachers to become primary "players" in early childhood classrooms. Constructivist methods applied to play education provide opportunities for adult learners to acquire the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that will make them master teachers.

Case Method and Play Education

The case method has been advocated as an effective approach to teacher education (Holmes Group, 1986; Kowalski, 1990; Merseth, 1991; Shulman, 1992; Wassermann, 1993, 1994). Case methodology provides a medium for learning that centers on student thinking. The goal of case-based teaching is to facilitate active learning and autonomy (self-governed learning) and to produce a state of cognitive dissonance (Klein, 1989). When confronted with uncertainty or cognitive dissonance during a case study, students engage in a process of applying theoretical knowledge (connecting what they know to new situations), utilizing analytical skills (making meaning of a situation), and creating innovative approaches to resolving problems (playing with or testing ideas). Case-based learning fosters independent thinking, empowers students as "processors of information," and produces a sense of competence and mastery. Finally, learning by the case method inspires students to reflect on their practice and to develop new perspectives and dispositions.

The Case

A case is pivotal to case-based teaching and learning. The case must provide ample details, giving richness and depth to a situation and present a problem or situation for analysis and discussion.

> A good case is the vehicle by which a chunk of reality is brought into the classroom to be worked over by the class and the instructor. A good case keeps the class discussion grounded upon some of the stubborn facts that must be faced in real life situations. It is the anchor on academic flights of speculation. It is the record of complex situations that must be literally pulled apart and put together again before the situations can be understood. It is the target for the expression of attitudes or ways of thinking brought into the classroom. To be all these things, a case must essentially represent a good job of reporting (Lawrence, 1953, p. 215).

A case is a realistic, true account of teaching practice and presents pertinent information involving children, their teachers or other persons, and an early childhood setting. Additional information presented in a case might entail describing the dynamics of a setting or the background information on characters in the case.

A ***written narrative*** (a story being told) is the most common format for a case. Narratives can provide single or multiple perspectives of situations. When an actual situation is described, names and other pieces of information are altered to protect the identity of characters or settings. Other formats for cases are literary works (book), videos, films, dramatizations, or "live" cases (Klein, 1992).

Case questions, an integral part of the case study, are created to stimulate inquiry and analysis. The questions provide an analytical framework for the investigation of issues or ideas central to the case (Kleinfeld, 1992; Wassermann, 1994). Goals for case discussion and analysis vary. The case may be designed to promote theoretical interpretation and analysis, integration of theory into practice, collaborative problem solving, innovative thinking, or a combination of these.

Case Analysis

Case-based pedagogy fosters group interaction that is initiated when participants in a case discussion react to a dilemma or problem inherent in a case read by the group. A case discussion leader poses questions to facilitate investigation of key issues ("What is this a case of?"). The case method supports the goals of play education. Through the process of case discussion and analysis, students broaden their knowledge about play as they

- ❑ interpret information and connect ideas to their knowledge about play
- ❑ explore, investigate, and develop new perspectives
- ❑ create hypotheses to explain what has been observed
- ❑ construct innovative solutions to problems
- ❑ experiment with divergent approaches to facilitating play
- ❑ reflect on personal experiences and teaching practice
- ❑ establish frameworks and principles to guide their practice

Case discussion and analysis prompt students to become decision makers and to apply various roles to facilitate play (e.g., stage manager, mediator, player). During case discussion, students share attitudes and feelings acquired as a result of their play experiences. This exposes them to a wide range of dispositions and may stimulate them to develop new perspectives and greater awareness of what motivates successful teachers. Students can make discoveries about their teaching by comparing their dispositions to those held by master teachers described by Carter and Curtis (1994).

Case Writing

Case writing has become an integral part of many teacher education programs and has been advocated as a technique to strengthen reflective practice (e.g., Florio-Ruane, 1990; Wassermann, 1993). Engaging students as case writers enhances

their professional growth. When students are required to write cases about problems they have encountered in facilitating play with children, they build habits of thinking about their teaching (Wasserman, 1993) and engage in self-governed learning. Through the process of constructing a case, students critically examine their practice and beliefs about play.

By writing cases about dilemmas they face in their work, novice teachers develop skills such as establishing collegial relationships, articulating educational problems precisely, and defining problematic issues and potential solutions. (Richert, 1992, p. 155)

A case is written for "other people" and should be constructed for the purpose of investigation and analysis of a problem. In constructing a case, a writer must focus on the nature of a problem, frame it in a context, and articulate what is known about it. Writing a good case requires that the author go beyond a narrow, personal view and take into consideration the many perspectives and critical variables that contribute to the case. A case writer must engage in objective reporting while keeping track of the major variables inherent in the play situation.

Students are often eager to write cases about their first-hand experiences and to share them with their peers. These experiences are personally meaningful and of great importance to novice teachers because they have a stake in the outcome. Students also discover that they enter a community of learners when their problems are investigated (and resolved) through group case discussion.

Case Teaching

When students lead a discussion of a case they have written, they broaden their knowledge and understanding of case material. Being a case teacher requires that students (a) deal with information on an abstract level, and (b) delve more deeply into the meaning of the case to develop a clear, objective, and global understanding of issues. During the process of leading a case discussion, students must take into consideration diverse perspectives and interpretations of problems, a process referred to as cognitive flexibility (Spiro, et al., 1988).

A case leader must analyze responses and keep participants focused on major issues. To facilitate adult learning during case discussion, case leaders must allow participants to construct knowl-

edge through inquiry and discovery. A major goal of play education is to provide opportunities for learners to transform knowledge about play. A case leader must be able to guide participants in extending and synthesizing ideas and in exploring relationships between ideas. Students become successful case facilitators as they develop questioning, listening, observing, and communicating skills.

Developing a Play Case Bank

Teacher-Written and Student-Written Cases

Experienced teachers, parents, administrators, and professional support staff are valuable sources of information on children's play. By sharing their practical knowledge and professional expertise, adults who work with children can write cases that represent a wide range of perspectives on play. To further enrich the content and context of play cases, professionals and other knowledgeable adults can also provide important information about culture, class, gender, and race as integral components of cases.

Early childhood specialists (including parents) who routinely engage in play experiences with children can portray the complexity of play situations and orient students to the messy world of teaching in cases. Students (case readers) become aware that teaching and problem solving require research, collaboration, and perseverance on the part of the teacher.

Students who have had practical experiences in early childhood settings are potential resources as case writers. Students can describe teaching/learning dilemmas from their developmental perspective as novice teachers and facilitators of play. Cases can also be written by teams of students who have first-hand knowledge of a play situation. Their shared experiences can form the nucleus for a case.

A desire to teach others by sharing personal experiences motivates early childhood specialists to write teaching cases. Other incentives for writing cases might include monetary compensation, professional development (education) credits, or opportunities for publication.

Videos, Films, and Books as Cases

Although the written narrative is the most prevalent form a case takes, other approaches have been utilized to present information as cases for investigation. Formats such as videos, television documentaries (Klein, 1991), films, and literary works (Tiedt, 1992) can provide detailed descriptions about a real-life situation or highlight issues directly or indirectly related to play. A video presentation, such as a recording of a play episode in an early childhood setting, presents a slice of life depicting a situation with all of its complexities, including environmental factors, body language of the characters, and other details captured in the video.

Using video or other forms of cases as teaching tools presents challenges. For example, students become confused, perhaps overwhelmed, when they attempt to determine what a case consists of. These sources should be carefully selected to reflect the goals of case-based teaching and learning. In using a video, film, or book, the facilitator must have a clear purpose and an understanding of the major issues to be explored. In addition, the case facilitator must carefully guide participants in focusing on significant and relevant information and in making connections between big ideas. These types of cases are more conducive to open-ended rather than situation-specific discussions.

Students and case teachers can also create their own videos and present them for case discussion. Producing a video poses challenges similar to those in writing a case. The producer must present an unbiased account of a situation and record as much information as possible (e.g., focusing on all characters, examining the environment). Because the producer cannot predict what will transpire in the situation to be recorded, goals and issues can be identified only after reviewing the videotape.

Compiling and Organizing Cases

A play case bank is a collection of teaching cases, such as those previously described, which are designed to promote the investigation of play. Cases that are developed by adults who work together and who have shared experiences are the most powerful and relevant to communities of learners like participants in a teacher-training program, professionals in an early childhood setting, or other groups of adults who seek knowledge about children's play. A rich

assortment of teaching cases written by colleagues (including students and parents) supports the goals of play education: development of theoretical knowledge, practical skills, and professional attitudes.

Cases that are compiled for education purposes might be classified according to general categories (theoretical interpretations and applications), teacher-specific categories (intervention, facilitation, management), child-specific categories (physically challenged, culturally diverse, gifted), or content-specific categories (violence, literacy). The selection of cases is determined by the goals and needs of a learning community.

Case materials can be developed and organized in a variety of ways.

1. narrative, written cases individually bound, groupings bound together (casebook with an introduction and table of contents);

2. computer-programmed cases (individual or groupings of cases);

3. videos, films as cases, commercial or self-made;

4. videos, films, articles, books as supplementary resources (to be used in conjunction with a case);

5. other resources to enhance case study (e.g., guest speakers, visitation sites).

Conclusion

Case methodology can be an integral component of play education. Case-based teaching is an interactive, learner-centered approach that reflects developmental and constructivist principles of learning. The case method prepares students to think like professionals, understand the complex nature and functions of play, and become effective teachers of young children.